

The Epistemology of Womanhood: Ignored Contentions among Igbo Women of Eastern Nigeria¹

Jonathan Okeke Chimakonam

Department of Philosophy

University of Calabar

Nigeria

jonathansphilosophy@gmail.com

and

Sunny Nzie Agu

Department of Philosophy

Cross River State University of Science and Technology, Calabar

Nigeria

snamassociate@ymail.com

Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.5 No.2, December 2013, pp.57-79

thoughtandpractice@gmail.com

<http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>

ISSN: 2076-7714

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Faculty of Arts Conference, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2012.

Abstract

Feminists all over the world are united in their contentions on many fronts such as societal norms and conditions that militate against a woman's expression of her rights and abilities. In as many fronts, they have gained grounds, if not outright victories. However, we observe that among the Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria there is a front which accounts for substantial female deprivation, and which feminists have consistently passed over in their contentions, namely, the feminine cognition also known as epistemology of womanhood. In this paper, using the random sampling method, we have arrived at the conclusion that consciousness of their own gender has deprived Igbo women of free expression of their rights and abilities, sometimes as much as constraining societal norms and conditions have done. Consequently, we recommend a conscious adjustment of the epistemology of womanhood among Igbo women.

Key words

Feminism, epistemology of womanhood, Igbo women, ignored contention, Feminist psychology

Introduction

The ultimate focus of feminist movements since their modern emergence in the 1800's, whether in social, political, religious, cultural or economic dimensions, is on the equality of women with men (Freedman 2003, 46). With the exception of Lesbian feminism, various conceptions of feminism including cultural feminism, ecofeminism, libertarian feminism, material feminism, moderate feminism, gender feminism, radical feminism and amazon feminism have all delicately overlooked the biological differences between men and women, and instead focused on amplifying their similarities. Both Men and women play important natural roles, men with the life giving seed, women with the trademark womb. They are both humans, two equally important sexes. Why then should women, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, be treated as the second sex? (de Beauvoir 1952, 1-5). Words such as

discrimination, subjugation, domination, maltreatment, abuse and neglect have been employed to describe men's actions with reference to the question above. The answer to the question as to whether or not men are guilty as charged is a foregone conclusion - they are, and no one in his right mind can challenge this unless of course he is a chauvinist. Yet even chauvinism has been rendered radically unfashionable by the cascading feminist influence on today's world. Thus it is not the intention of this paper to dispute the fact that men are guilty as charged.

The victories of feminist movements have gone a long way to lend credence to the fact that men, and the society in general, have subjugated women. Mary Kissian (2005, 6-7) notes that the First Wave feminists (1880-1900's) who focused their struggles on gaining legal rights such as the right to vote (women's suffrage), property rights and rights to have a say with regards to their children won landmark victories beginning in North America. The Second Wave Feminists (1960s-1970's), who focused on a broad range of issues such as discrimination in the work place and in the broader society, affirmative action, pay equity, rape, domestic violence, pornography and sexism in the media, and reproductive choice also gained outstanding victories in many countries, especially in Europe and the Americas (Butler 1992, 30).

Then there are the present feminists - the Third Wave Feminists (1990's to date) - who focus on race and class alongside some of the older contentions that are yet to be settled, especially in many Third World countries (Kassian 2005, 7). Some of the concerns of feminism such as cultural, social, political, religious, economic and the wider legal issues reverberate on the topical discussions and legislative debates around the world, with a variety of priorities: in Saudi Arabia, it is the rights to drive and to participate in politics; in China, it is the right to have a say and to make it count, that is, it is not enough to have the right to voice one's opinion but such a right should confer on one the ability to make her opinions count in policy formulations; in South Africa, it is the right to pay equity, that is, women should be entitled to equal pay with men for the same labour; in Malta, it is the right to reproductive choice; In Afghanistan and Somalia it is the right to education; but in Igboland of Nigeria, it is the freedom or right to be absolved from all forms of religious, economic, political, social and cultural discriminatory and humiliating practices (Uchem 2001, 20-22). These form the bedrock of the Third Wave Feminist contentions in Igboland.

However, there is a fundamental factor which feminist agitations in Igboland share with some other nations of the world, namely, the way in which men and societies at large view women, that is, what they think of the female sex. It is against this outlook that the feminist upsurge in Igboland is directed. However, in this paper, we want to extrapolate, based on our survey results, that some of the discriminations women suffer in Igboland are inspired not essentially by the masculinist outlook, but by the feminist mindset, that is, the epistemology of womanhood. Some Igbo feminist writers such as Uchem (2001, 20), Mma Odi (2010, 1- 9) and Mbonu (2010, 10-45) would not agree with this view. These scholars attribute the psychological and the wider socio-political and religious subordination of women in Igboland to the Igbo culture and, of course, masculine maltreatment.

Nevertheless, feminist psychology, which addresses the connection between psychology and gender, holds that to some extent the structural appurtenances of the society such as those that traditionally treat women as the inferior sex have a way of affecting the female mindset and under-cutting the female ability (Horney 1967, 23). It is in this regard that we investigate the female mindset in Igboland with a view to finding out whether it is psychologically vitiated by societal structures. However, there are also the left wing defeatist feminists who hold that women are in some way physically inferior to men even if not mentally, and that this minor difference has to be recognized in the society in ways that protect women from abuse rather than in ways that project physical equality. According to Christina Hoff Sommers (1995), some of the feminists that can be located within the defeatist category include Camille Paglia, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Daphne Patai. These feminists criticize radical feminist positions as harmful to both men and women, and accuse them of going to the extreme (Sommers 1995, 320). It is to the position of this group that we in this paper find support in defending our hypothesis that the whole blame should not rest on the Igbo culture and masculine orientation. Nevertheless, we do not argue for the idea that the female sex is weaker than the male in terms of their physical abilities. Instead, our focal point is that given the societal structures, the feminist psychology is inevitably affected by its own unfair assessment of its abilities. It is in this light that we recommend a form of feminist psychoanalysis or feminist therapy to address this psychological ill which we here designate non-technically as the epistemology of womanhood.

Most of the respondents to our questionnaire admit that the conscious knowledge that they are women accounts for their passive expression of their abilities. For some respondents, this knowledge is inspired by what men think of women. Nevertheless, the fact of men's poor impression of women should go beyond the intuitive level because it is easy to see that however Igbo men view women must somehow proceed from the impressions Igbo women give about their strengths and weaknesses. To others, this conscious knowledge is based on their natural awareness of their weak (inferior) bodily make up and probably the mental as well in comparison to those of men. This takes us to our observation in the first paragraph that some feminist contenders overlook or ignore the differences between the male and female sexes. We are not by default attempting any justification of the men's domination of women based on the observed differences, neither are we trying to confirm the existence of such. What we intend to point out is that the female sex's more often than not pretended weaknesses of body and mind may have inspired the poor impression men have of them generally. In fact, if the bodily weaknesses exist at all, the same may not be said of the mental, as women have been known to demonstrate greater mental strength in times of stress (Uchem 2001, 87).

However, where the reality of the observed differences between men and women is disputed, the epistemology of womanhood² - the thesis that there is an intuitive awareness in the feminist psychology that women constitute the weaker sex - becomes an ignored contention. We, therefore, put the thesis of ignored contention forward as the focus of the Fourth Wave Feminists not only in Igboland, but also elsewhere in the world. Our recommendation can be likened to Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift. For the first time in the history of feminism, actors are by the thesis of this essay encouraged to carry the feminist agitations not only against the usual male outlook, but also against the female mindset which hinders them from full expression of their abilities. This can be achieved through a form of feminist psychoanalysis (Horney 1967, 13-44) or feminist therapy (Crawford and Unger 2000, 20-30). Perhaps with these ideas of feminist psychoanalysis and feminist therapy as remedies for the female mindset, we are coming upon a better solution to the issues associated with the female mindset.

² The word "Epistemology" in the phrase "Epistemology of Womanhood" is used in a non-technical sense to indicate a form of self-awareness implicit in the feminist psychology of action, desiring, expression and decision. It specifically refers to the sort of psychological awareness that make Igbo women conscious of societal stereotypes such as physical weakness and inferiority to the male sex. We argue in this paper that such awareness, which hinders women from full expression of their abilities, has become more devastating in our time than the overt cultural and masculine deprivations.

This paper is divided into four main sections, excluding this introductory one. The next section defines feminism. Thereafter, we look at some of the basic feminist contentions in Igboland. That is followed by the section titled “Ignored Contention”, which highlights issues associated with the female mindset as an obstacle to women’s free expression of their abilities. Finally, we present our conclusion, where we recommend the tools of feminist psychoanalysis as veritable solutions to the problems associated with the epistemology of womanhood (female cognition) as discussed in this Work.

Feminism Defined

Haslanger and Tuana write:

The term “feminism” has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term “feminism” to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Although the term “feminism” has a history in English linked with women's activism from the late 19th century to the present, it is useful to distinguish feminist ideas or beliefs from feminist political movements, for even in periods where there has been no significant political activism around women's subordination, individuals have been concerned with and theorized about justice for women (Haslanger and Tuana 2012).

One major presupposition of ideas such as these is that women in many societies are marginalized and suffer all kinds of subordination. Proponents of this view find strength in the works of the likes of J.S. Mill (1869), while the polemics feast on the works of the likes of Nietzsche (Durant 1926/2006).

Discussions on the main concerns of feminism gradually took shape. Thus wherever the tune of feminism is harped, it draws attention. This is why the Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary sees it as a doctrine. It defines it as “the doctrine which declares the equality of the sexes and advocates equal social, political and economic rights for women” (cited in Typhoon 2004, 465). We can infer that regardless of the location of feminist agitations, they concur on their objective, namely, the according of the same rights and privileges to women as to men.

In their deeply insightful paper, Alvarez *et. al.* quote Mattes as saying “another world without feminism is impossible” (Alvarez *et. al.* 2003, 202). The impact of feminism is already being felt in various societies. Let us give a few examples in this regard. We now witness the widespread allotting of special seats to represent feminist concerns on the basis of “affirmative action”. In addition, concerning geography and the environment, Suzanne Mackenzie states that “Rewriting geography with the women in it” has been going on for some time now (Mackenzie 1984, 182). Elizabeth Anderson also notes:

Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science studies the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups, and strives to reform these conceptions and practices so that they serve the interests of these groups (Anderson 2000).

This view is shared by Marianne Janack, who posits that “what is common to feminist epistemologies is an emphasis on the epistemic salience of gender and the use of gender as an analytic category in discussions, criticisms, and reconstructions of epistemic practices, norms, and ideals” (Janack 2004).

Thus Kassian in her image-driven work defines feminism as the women’s movement which focuses on the pursuit of meaning, wholeness, and equality for women (Kassian 2005, 17). This means that all the movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women can be classified as feminist. Kassian equates the rise of feminism with a tsunami, typically the type that occurred in Japan in 1896 (Kassian 2005, 7). She writes:

... feminism is part of the seismic post-modern earthquake. Feminism proposes that women find happiness and meaning through the pursuit of personal authority, autonomy, and freedom. This philosophy’s shake-up of society occurred roughly during the thirty-year period from 1960 to 1990. But the cataclysmic consequences will continue to crash on cultures shores like a tsunami throughout the opening decades of the new millennium (Kassian 2005, 7).

With the apparent discomfort resulting from these cultural shake-ups, we are bound to ask, where did these waves come from? Kassian (2005, 17) answers that the “first wave” of

feminism began in the late 1700s when an English woman, Mary Wollstonecraft, penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Within a year of its publication, Olympe de Gouges issued a street pamphlet in Paris titled “*Les Droits de la Femme*” (The Rights of Woman) and an American, Judith Sargent Murray, published *On the Equality of the Sexes* in Massachusetts. Other influential feminist thinkers soon emerged, including Frances Wright, Sarah Grimke, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill. Together, these nineteenth-century feminists initiated a tide of revolutionary fervor that swept through the western world.

Feminist Contentions in Igboland

As happened in the West, the wave of feminist agitations has now reached the shores of Igboland. Uchem, in her ground breaking doctoral dissertation, accused some aspects of Igbo culture of being the bastion of women’s subordination in various facets of social life, especially the religious:

... there is a relationship between women’s subordination in the Catholic Church and in the Igbo culture, epitomized by male-headship model of family, civil and church life; and ultimately symbolized by women’s exclusion from celebrating public sacramental ritual (Eucharist) in the Catholic Church and (the kolanut) in the Igbo culture ... this apparent similarity nullifies and suppresses affirmations of women’s dignity present in both the Igbo culture and in the church’s teachings. ... (that) women’s subordination in the Catholic Church reinforces those aspects of Igbo culture, which are oppressive to women (Uchem 2001, 20).

Feminist agitations in Igboland can be traced to 1902, during the war between the British and the people of Arochukwu, otherwise known as the Aro expedition (Obaro 1977, 164-168; Stride 1971, 354-355; Ekeh & Okonkwo 2000, 28). Before this time, Igbo women saw their socio-cultural, economic and religious status as, for want of a better word, normal.

Though Aro women did not fight the British forces under Lt. Col. H.F. Montanaro alongside the Aro men, they played logistical roles such as spying and weapons transportation, care of the wounded as well as feeding the troops. Some of these vital roles have not been documented; but for the women it was a war not simply against the British invasion, but

against a new socio-cultural order. Among the Igbo women of those days, the men folk were looked upon as “living gods”. In line with Igbo culture, husbands were regarded by their wives as their *chis* (personal gods or guardians) to protect and provide (Madu 1992, 35). For the Aro women therefore, the British invasion represented a shake-up of this order, a dethronement of their “living gods” and their “personal gods” - the ones they called *Nna-anyi* (“my lord or “our lord”). Thus their agitation was not to preserve the political organogram of the Aro Empire, but to preserve what was to them the basis of the feminine existence. Besides the protection and provision offered by men, the Igbo socio-cultural order had room for women to enjoy some influence through the *umu-ada* or *umu-okpu* and *ndi-inyom* (lineage daughters’ and lineage wives’ groups) that handled feminine matters in Igboland. The women agitated against the new order which would rob them of this influence. This is why in her paper, “(Re)venturing into the public sphere: Historical sociology of August Meeting Among Igbo Women in Nigeria”, Odoemene explains:

In the pre-colonial era, Igbo women had direct involvement and considerable influence in the public sphere, which was defined through institutional provisions as the socio-political arena. The advent of colonialism, however, introduced some policies which put women and their activities down, and considerably diminished the women’s status and agency in Igboland (Odoemene 2011, 220).

By the 1920’s, the harsh realities of the colonial intrusion were beginning to tell on the Igbo women. Men now demanded of their wives some economic contribution to the upkeep of the family. The word “lazy” became a common abusive word some husbands used on their now agitating wives. With the individualism of the Western outlook came talk about human rights. If women had rights not to be subordinated, so did men not to be oppressed. The saying “*obere azu kpata obere nku, nnukwu azu kpata nnukwu nku*” (“let the small fish fetch a small bunch of firewood and let the big fish fetch a big firewood”) became the demand of Igbo men on their wives. Disgruntled about this sudden change of things, women reluctantly began to venture into economic activities. As they began to assert themselves in this way, the lines of the sacred or the “don’ts for women” were also broken. Thus as a means of protest, Igbo women began to challenge the so-called preserve of men. In *There was a Country*, Achebe (2012, 10) reported a similar incident of protest involving his mother in the 1930’s, who against the dictates of Igbo custom, picked kola nut from the tree and from the ground in the view of some male folk. As Achebe clearly explained, in normal times, this would have

attracted severe punishment for his mother, but due to shifting values, she argued her way out before the villagers. We can guess what the content of her arguments were.

1929 was the year of the Aba Women Riot, during which over 10,000 women from communities around Aba, a commercial town close to Arochukwu, stood up against the colonial administration's attempt to tax them. In reality, they were fighting the colonists who had stuck up the odds against them. Women did not pay taxes in the traditional Igbo society which the British destroyed (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1929 Notes, Paragraph 10; Aborisade *et. al.* 2002, 24; Oriji 2000, 37). This uprising became an inspiration to agitations by women in Owerri and Onitsha in 1956, directed against the colonialists who they felt had robbed them of their socio-cultural relevance and of their *chis* (personal gods) in the persons of their strong husbands who protected them and provided for them. In simple terms, Igbo men had been at the women's beck and call.

However, from the late 1980s, Igbo women who had traveled to lands beyond the Atlantic came back home to sensitise fellow women about the urgent need for feminist agitation. The old Igbo socio-cultural set-up for which their predecessors had risen up against the colonialists had become for them the enemy. Earlier in the century, women neither agitated against the Igbo culture nor felt a need to do so. However, by the late 1980's, all those cultural conditions were ironically seen to constitute indices for women's subordination. Odi Mma (2010, 1- 9) writes that in contemporary Igbo society where males dominate to various degrees, the belief is that culture objectively permits or promotes the denial of women's rights. Traditional values give men proprietary rights over women. These values regard women as inferior to men.

Shocking as it may sound, in order to be on the same page with feminist movements all over the world, some Igbo feminists now equate their once cherished Igbo culture with colonial posturing. For example, Uchem writes:

... the motive for the continued subordination of women, symbolized by women's exclusion from ordination and from decision-making, is highly suspect. The reasons advanced are not convincing in the light of all the mounting evidence from the collusion of Christian imperialist domination with Igbo cultural subordination (Uchem 2001, 161).

As an implication of the views Uchem expresses above, it should be noted that prior to this shift of the 1980's, Igbo women found nothing wrong with the Igbo cultural conditions or with Igbo men. In fact, they felt well off in the system. You could see them, once married, taking nicknames that expressed their satisfaction with the Igbo men and the cultural system. Some of them bore such fond names as *Oli-aku* (wealth consumer), *Obi-di-ya* (husband's heart), *Enyi-di-ya* (husband's heartthrob), *Ugo-di-ya* (husband's beauty or pride), *Di-ma-anu* (husband marries me well), *Apunanwu* (never toils in the sun), *Di-bu-ogo* (husband is my glory), and *Di-bu-ndo* (husband is my shed or shelter). So important was this name taking ceremony that every woman seized the opportunity to demonstrate in the name she had chosen that her husband happened to be the best or the worst. It was a way for the women to tell the world their personal experiences. The nicknames that women took became their identities in the society for life. On their part, Igbo men strove to show the world that they actually represented what their wives had expressed in the names. As tools of control, some women threw parties to renew or change their own names to something more glamorous when their husbands had shown exceptional performance in providing for their happiness. The importance of this name-taking is illustrated in the titles of the works of some feminist writers such as flora Nwapa's *Di Bu Nma Ogori* ("Husband is a Woman's Beauty") (Chuku 2013, 277).

However, in view of the shift of the 1980's, Igbo women now censor some of the nicknames they take. Names that portray female weakness or laziness have now been dropped or modified. For example, instead of *Oli-aku* (wealth consumer), they now prefer *Odozi-aku* (wealth organizer); instead of *Obi-di-ya* (husband's heart), they now bear the name to mean husband's counselor; in place of *Ugo-di-ya* (husband's beauty), they now commonly take *Ugwu-di-ya* (husband's pride). We can therefore see how the shift of the 1980's produced a remarkable change in the feminist orientation among Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria. This is because as the Igbo women began to rebel against the system, accusing men of systemic

subordination, men in turn grew angry and taunted them with laziness. To shake off the tag of laziness, Igbo women began to abandon names that portrayed them in ways that they could no longer identify with.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that beyond these little attitudinal changes lies the entrenched intuitive awareness by the women of the inferiority of their sex, an awareness which ultimately hinders the full expression of their abilities. Here we describe this phenomenon as the epistemology of womanhood. It is a form of knowledge that hinders, and it is in part psychological (Horney 1922, 37).

In Igboland, feminist agitations in line with the spirit of the global movement began in the late 1980s as little demonstrations, protests, court cases, pamphlets, newspaper articles, radio and TV jingles, among others. Nevertheless, victories never streamed in until the return of democracy in 1999, when sustained actions saw the enactment of legislations that favour women's positions in matters such as demeaning and discriminatory cultural practices.

Some of the basic feminist contentions in Igboland for which partial or full victories have been gained include:

- i. All forms of proprietary rights, including the right to inheritance.
- ii. Leadership/political rights.
- iii. Protection against all forms of humiliating mourning rites, and all other forms of abusive cultural rites.
- iv. Divorce rights.

All these rights, together with the ones provided for in the 1999 Nigerian constitution, were gained in practice through a gradual process of legislation at both federal and state levels. There have been legislations around these four broad areas of concern in all the Houses of Assembly of the five core Igbo states, namely, Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu and Ebonyi, between 1999 and 2010. These represent the first and the second wave contentions of feminism.

Now Igbo women want so much more: they want the right to make their own economic, reproductive and political decisions; they want the right to take chieftaincy titles no longer subordinated to their husband's titles; they want the right to become members of Nzen'ozo title society - the apex sacred and decision-making body in all of Igboland; they want the right to hold the *ọfọ* (Igbo insignia of authority) staff and to strike it on the earth in prayer; they want the girl child to have as much freedom as the boy child at the play arena and in community activities such as climbing trees, especially the palm tree and the kola nut tree, and to belong to masquerade groups.³ Above all, they want the right to celebrate prayers and rituals with kola nuts. In a nutshell, they want to be treated as equals with men in their homes and in the community, and no longer as their husbands' or fathers' property (Uchem 2001, 20, 161).

These later contentions represent the Third Wave Feminism in Igboland. Most of the items on the list above are regarded by the men and by some women as not just impossible but as ultimately unwarranted. Consequently, the Third Wave Feminists are increasingly becoming unpopular in Igboland. They have been accused of trying to wreck the Igbo tradition. A number of women splinter groups such as *Umu-ada Igbo* (daughters of Igboland) have also arisen to oppose the Third Wave Feminists (Chuku 2013, 277). They now campaign on what they call cultural and moral restitution among women in Igboland. They even send bills and try to influence the five Igbo Houses of Assembly to pass laws against some of the contentions of Third Wave Feminism in Igboland including reproductive choices such as the right to abortion, as well as economic activities such as under-age trading/hawking and prostitution (Chuku 2013, 282-283).

On the whole, we infer that the feminist movement in Igboland, which redirected its focus and agitations in the late 1980s, identified Igbo culture and Igbo men as the perpetrators of injustice and domination of women. Uchem writes:

³ The masquerade group in Igbo society is a forum for the youth. Membership to it pre-qualifies one as a potential future leader. Excluding young women from belonging to this important training group simply means they would not hold significant leadership positions in the society in their adulthood.

... the Igbo men who try to intimidate Igbo women into subservience and passivity by brandishing “our culture” exhibit this tendency (subordinating women). They use Igbo culture and tradition to justify their abusive behaviour towards women and for insulting those Igbo men, who unlike themselves, try to behave justly toward women (Uchem 2001, 166).

Nevertheless, in this work, we are identifying yet another culprit of women’s domination, namely, female cognition, which we tag in a non-technical sense as the epistemology of womanhood. The Third Wave Feminism in Igboland should fight this culprit, because it has probably done more havoc to women’s free expression of their abilities than Igbo men and the Igbo culture have done. To us, it is the ignored contention, to which we now turn.

The Epistemology of Womanhood: The Ignored Contention

In our view, it is possibly the epistemology of womanhood, that is, the female mindset or the female cognition, that has done the most havoc on the women’s expression of their abilities in Igboland. As we conceive it in this work, the epistemology of womanhood is different from the popular notion of feminist epistemology which focuses on the view that the peculiar position of women enables them to see the world through a feminist lens. Feminist epistemology, broadly speaking, studies the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification (Anderson 2000). In other words, it identifies ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution and justification systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups, and strives to reform these conceptions and practices so that they serve the interests of these groups (Potter 2007, 235-236; Code 2007, 211-212). On the other hand, we define the epistemology of womanhood as that internal, psychological and cognitive state which impulsively reminds a woman of her gender and its association with weakness and inferiority as natural dynamics. Thus the epistemology of womanhood is a woman’s conception of herself which is internal and debased. This conception, which is based on the observed differences between the male and female sexes, allocates bodily and mental superiority to the male sex as if it is a natural phenomenon.

This female mindset has been a barrier to Igbo women since the advent of the post-colonial era with regards to the expression of their abilities. Recall that in the pre-colonial era, Igbo women had been “spoilt” by a culture that placed all responsibilities of survival in a dangerous tropical environment on the man - he was to protect and provide. As earlier noted, women took glamorous titles that depicted their highly privileged status. This privileged status can be further demonstrated by the fact that every married woman in Igbo society automatically bore *Oli-akụ di-ya* (consumer of husband’s wealth). Under a culture that afforded them so much enjoyment and little suffering, it is understandable why women would do much to strengthen the impression on their men that they (the women) were the weaker and inferior sex; after all, no one finds pleasure in fighting dangerous beasts such as lions and leopards, cutting down huge trees and hewing them to bits with crude implements, or tilling acres of land with a little blunt hoe. These were what the colonial invaders robbed the Igbo women of, and for which they fought the British the most from the Aro expedition of 1902 where they instigated and supported their men to fight, to the Aba women’s riot of 1929, and the Owerri and Onitsha women’s uprisings of 1956, among others. In the pre-colonial era, even a widow’s upkeep automatically became the responsibility of her husband’s brothers as soon as her husband passed on; but in the post-colonial climate, when women began their feminist agitations which led to men changing their posture, it is no longer so. Aware of this harsh reality, Igbo women rose with one voice in the August meetings of 1995 and 1996 to replace the title *Oriaku* (wealth consumer) traditionally and automatically conferred on any married woman with *Odozi-aku* (wealth manager), since they are now expected to toil like their husbands (Odoemene 2011, 219-230).

Thus with the colonial demolition of the Igbo socio-political, religious and cultural order, the chauvinistic Igbo man who died that his women may live adjusted his concerns following the feminist agitations. Thus the pleasure-loving Igbo women found, to their shock, that their new freedom came with responsibility. At first they agitated against the new Western order. When they found this to be hopeless, they turned their agitations against Igbo men and Igbo culture in line with feminism, which was becoming popular following the return of Western educated Igbo women. The reason for this shift is that if the new post colonial order points to the reality that they will soon begin to shoulder responsibilities, they should at least have all their freedom. To this end they have won outstanding victories, but there is still a thick line between the Igbo man’s expression of his abilities and that of the Igbo woman. For lagging

behind the males in some professional and career demands, they still point an accusing finger at the Igbo man and the Igbo culture. It is for this reason that we conducted a research between December 13 2010 and January 17 2011 on randomly selected women from five communities in the five Igbo states (Okeke and Agu 2010/2011). We attempted to obtain an objective result which could be helpful in catalyzing the holistic development of Igbo women. As such, the questionnaire was designed to obtain individual self-assessments of the five hundred volunteered respondents. Although this is a small sample population for a large territory with a large population, it is nonetheless broadly representative, because women in Igboland share similar cultural and existential experiences.

The results of the study show that 88% of the women stated that the knowledge that they are women affects their performance of any task, including tasks in their profession or business, especially when there are men to compete with. Eight per cent stated that their performance of any task or in their profession is determined by their feminine abilities which are limited. Three per cent stated that they are not sure if the knowledge of being a woman actually affects them or not, while only 1% stated that the knowledge of being a woman does not impair their abilities, but that the real obstacles are strictly men and the Igbo culture.

From the foregoing responses, we arrived at the conclusion that the knowledge of being a woman (“the epistemology of womanhood”) plays a pivotal role in barring Igbo women from the full expression of their abilities. It should be noted that when Igbo women turned their agitations against Igbo men and Igbo culture, they did not also turn away from their own centuries’ old mindset that they are the weaker and inferior sex who must be protected and provided for by men. It is this mindset, carried over into a new order of individual-based freedom and responsibility, that our survey shows is largely responsible for Igbo women’s restraint from fully expressing their abilities.

Conclusion

Prior to modernity, the wave of feminism was a revolution and a historical moment that was sure to come. Among the women of Igboland, it was easy to see that they would someday get tired of their drama and shadow impressions of bodily weakness and mental inferiority when the hologram of cultural privileges would be broken. When the colonial order marched in, this hologram was broken and the odds turned against the female sex. Disappointed, they now crave for what they had willingly given up. Feminism is therefore a way to get back the best side of the deal. Chinweizu told a personal story of how some Igbo women indulged in this crafty game in New York:

I was once helping a friend help his girlfriend move her belongings out of a New York apartment. After taking a heavy trunk down to the moving van, we were huffing and puffing our way back up the stairs. As soon as the woman and a girlfriend of hers saw us, they dropped a mattress they were carrying to the elevator, and began to complain that it was too heavy! Yet before they saw us, they carried it with no visible difficulty ... [among the Igbo], the idea of the stronger male is often dramatized by [women with] the image of a weak, defenseless wife ... (Chinweizu 1990, 86).

Although it is correct to say, following Alcoff and Kittay (2007, 2), that writings about women by philosophers such as Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche were not motivated by justice for women, the views of the philosophers just named contrast with those of Mill and Wollstonecraft who argued against the subjugation of women on the basis that women and men are equal sexes. Alcoff and Kittay went ahead to say that statements about women and the proper or natural gender relations are sometimes included as asides. At other times, they come as explicit claims such as the ones found in the writings of Aristotle and Nietzsche about the nature or natural conditions of women, which are employed to justify or explain women's subordination. An assumption about women's inferior capacities also becomes central in larger arguments about the right order of social, ethical or political life, or as part of arguments about the true nature of mankind (Alcoff and Kittay 2007, 2).

Nonetheless, the truth is that however the so-called male supremacists described or represented women in Igboland, it was the woman herself who put forward such impressions for some carefully crafted reasons. The Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria only learned to turn

their agitations from the colonial order towards the Igbo men and Igbo culture when they saw no hope in reclaiming their privileged past. This much we have shown in this work. However, the challenge is that when they eventually let off that glorious past and embraced the stark reality of the future, they, to their own undoing, took along the female mindset of that privileged past. Now that female mindset, that epistemology of womanhood, where they pretended to be weak and gave the impression that they were defenseless and inferior, inevitably haunts them whether in business, profession, or in other aspects of life, thereby militating against the full or modest expression of their natural abilities. This is a worthy contention which has been overlooked by feminists.

Consequently, we recommend that as part of the repertoire of their contentions, the Third Wave Feminists take some of their agitations back to the fold of women in Igboland and seek adjustment to the epistemology of womanhood. After all, a vast majority of people, including the traditional opponents of the feminist movement, accept that what a man can do, a woman can do even better! In most parts of Igboland women now engage in occupations previously reserved for men. In Ebonyi state, for example, women are now brick layers and stone crushers, but the epistemology of womanhood or their very nature has continued to affect their performance. Thus it is not only a question of the men or the Igbo culture hampering the women's productivity; rather, to a large extent, it is the knowledge of being women, unconsciously carried over from the old order!

We further recommend, following feminist psychologists such as Horney (1922), and Crawford and Unger (2000), what has been called feminist psychoanalysis or feminist therapy to address this demeaning self-assessment by Igbo women. Some feminist psychologists hold that a Freudian type of analysis or therapy is required to correct certain unhealthy mental states that affect women in the society (Crawford and Unger 2000). One of such is the female cognition or gender awareness that goes with the societal associations of certain stereotypes such as women's weakness and inferiority to the male sex. Healing Igbo women of this condition would place them on the pedestal to freely express their abilities, and it is only then that they can be fairly judged by the avowed anti-feminists who assume in error that they (the women) are the second sex.

References

- Aba Commission of Inquiry. 1929. Notes of (10) 24-30. 4th Witness, Nwanyeruwa (F.A).
- Aborisade, O. and J.R. Mundt. 2002. *Politics in Nigeria*. New York: Longhorn.
- Achebe, Chinua. 2012. *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. London: Penguin Books.
- Alcoff, L. Martin and F. Eva Kittay. 2007. "Defining Feminist Philosophy". In Alcoff, Martin & F. Eva Kittay eds. 2007. *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy*. Malden, M.A: Blackwell Publishing, pp.1-13.
- Alvarez, S., N. Faria and M. Nobre. 2003. "Another (Also Feminist) World is Possible". *Journal of Feminist Studies (Brazil)*, Vol.11 No.2, pp.201-206.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2011. "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. www.stanford.plato.edu, First published Wed., Aug 9, 2000; substantive revision Wed Mar 16.
- Aristotle. 1976. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. A.K. Thomson trans. London: Penguin Books.
- Butler, Judith. 1992. "Feminism in Any Other Name". *Differences*, Vol.6 No.2, pp. 30-45.
- Chinweizu, Ibekwe. 1990. *Anatomy of Female Powers: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*. Lagos: Peso Press.
- Chuku, Gloria. 2013. "Nwanyibuife Flora Nwapa, Igbo Culture and Women's Studies" in Gloria Chuku Ed. *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition: Creative Conflict in African and African Diasporic Thought*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.267-293.
- Code, Lorraine. 2007. "Feminist Epistemologies and Women's Lives". In Alcoff and Kittay eds. 2007. *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy*. Malden, M.A: Blackwell Publishing, pp.211-234.
- Crawford, M. and R. Unger. 2000. *Women and Gender: A feminist psychology*, 3rd ed. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. 1952. *The Second Sex*. New York: Random House.
- Durant, Will. (1926) 2006. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Ezeh, Mary and Uche Okonkwo. 2010. "Place of Religion in Nation Building and Security in Nigeria: A Historical Survey of Aro Expedition of 1901". *African Journal of History and Culture*, Vol.2 No.2, February, 2010, pp.26-30.
- Haslanger, Sally and Nancy Tuana. 2012. "Topics in Feminism". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. www.stanford.plato.edu. November, 2012.
- Horney, Karen. 1967. *Feminine Psychology*. New York: Norton.

- Janack, Marianne. 2004. "Feminist Epistemology". *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. www.iep.utm.edu October, 2004.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*. John T. Trans. Goldthwait, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kassian, Mary. 2005. *The Feminist Mystique Mistake: The Radical Impact of Feminism on Church and Addure*. Illinois: Crossway Books.
- Kinnaird, Joan and Mary Astell. 1983. "Inspired by ideas (1668-1731)". In Spender, Dale ed. *There's always been a women's movement*. London: Pandora Press.
- Madu, R.O. 1992. *Principal Elements of Traditional Igbo Life in African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*. New York: Lang Publishing.
- Mackenzie, Suzanne. 1984. "A Socialist Feminist Perspective on Gender and Environment". *Antipode* Vol.16 No.3, pp.182-196.
- Mbonu, Caroline N. 2010. *Handmaid: The Power of Names in Theology and Society*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1869. *The Subjugation of Women*. London: Longmans.
- Obaro, Ikime. 1977. *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest; The Fall of Aro*. London: Heinemann.
- Odi, Mma. 2010. *The Power of Women's Collective Action*. Lagos: Ruwen.
- Odoemene, Akachi. 2011. "(Re) Venturing into the Public Sphere: Historical Sociology of 'August Meeting' Among Igbo Women in Nigeria". *African Development*, Vol.xxxvi No.2, pp.219-247.
- Okeke, Jonathan Chimakonam and Sunny Nzie Agu. 2011/2012. "Okeke and Agu 2010/2011 survey on how the knowledge of being a woman affect Igbo women's full expression of their abilities in terms of productivity and performance". Resource Centre, Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.
- Oriji, John. 1972. "Igbo Women from 1929-1960". *West African Review*, Vol.2 No.1, pp.37-45.
- Potter, Elizabeth. 2007. "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science". In Alcoff, Martin and F. Eva Kittay eds. 2007, *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy*. Malden, M.A: Blackwell Publishing, Pp.235-253.
- Rousseau, J.J. 1979. *Emile or on Education*. Alan Bloom trans. New York: Basic Books.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. 1995. *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Stride, G.T. and C. Ifeka. 1971. *People and Empires of West Africa in History*. London: Nelson.
- Typhoon International. 2004. *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language: Encyclopedic Edition*. Naples: Trident Press.

Uchem, Rose. 2001. *Overcoming Women's Subordination: An Igbo African and Christian Perspective: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women*. Enugu: Snaap Press.

Appendix: Prototype of the Questionnaire for Okeke and Agu 2010/2011

Survey

1. Name (surname first):.....
2. Village (Town):.....
3. Religion:.....
4. Level of Education (if any):.....
5. Occupation/Profession:.....
6. For how long have you being in occupation/profession.....
7. Level/Rank.....
8. How would you measure your productivity/performance top 5, top 10, top 20, average, poor (Please tick as appropriate).
9. What informed your choice of occupation/profession
.....
10. What is your preferred choice of occupation/profession.....
11. Why did you not pursue your choice
occupation/profession.....
.....(if applicable)
12. Do you think your knowledge of being a woman affects your
productivity/performance?.....
13. To what extent.....
14. Why.....
15. Do you think such knowledge does not affect your productivity/performance
.....
16. Why.....

17. Are you not sure whether such knowledge affects your performance/productivity.....
18. Do you think your productivity/performance is purely determined by limited abilities as a weak/inferior sex.....
19. Why do you think so.....
20. Do you think there are bodily and mental differences between men and women?.....
21. Why.....
22. Do you think men and women are equal in body and in mind.....
23. Are you unsure whether there are bodily and mental differences between men and women.....
24. Would you describe women as pleasure loving or vainglorious?.....
.....
25. Would you as a woman prefer privileges or freedom.....

.....

Signature and Date